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About Messrs. Kennedy, Nixon and Cuba

The renewed conflict between President Kennedy and former Vice-President Nixon over the Cuban debate in the 1960 campaign has some aspect of ancient history. Yet it also stirs large questions that deserve to be aired and answered.

With respect to the facts, there is clearly a large gap. In his new book, Mr. Nixon charges that Mr. Kennedy, at the very moment when he was publicly calling for active American aid to the anti-Castro forces and in effect reproaching the Eisenhower Administration for inertia, knew that a guerrilla force was being trained under U. S. direction. Such information had been given to Mr. Kennedy, Nixon asserts, in CIA "briefings."

Mr. Kennedy flatly denies that he had received any such information. His denial is strongly supported by CIA chief Allen Dulles, who certainly has no visible Democratic bias, and who politely suggests that there has been an "honest misunderstanding." Mr. Eisenhower has issued a rather guarded affirmation of Nixon's version.

All that is plain in this tangle is that, at no time in the preparation of his book, did Mr. Nixon seek to check the facts with Allen Dulles. If he had, he would surely have been obliged to record Mr. Dulles' rebuttal. This must, at the very least, be described as journalistic negligence.

But in another sense it does not go to the heart of the matter. For the deeper question, which seems to elude Mr. Nixon, is whether his subsequent conduct would have been justified even if Mr. Kennedy were totally guilty as charged.

Mr. Nixon says that, when his opponent issued his call for direct aid to the anti-Castro rebels, he felt it was not only his duty to maintain silence on our secret operations but to "go to the other extreme" and denounce Mr. Kennedy's proposal. This he did in their ensuing television debate; he said Kennedy's call for action was "dangerously irresponsible," that it would, if heeded, "lose all our friends in Latin America" and provide an "open invitation" to Premier Khrushchev "to come into Latin America and to interfere in what would be a civil war and possibly worse than that."

It is perhaps ironic, Mr. Nixon himself notes, that what many editorialists in many places deemed his finest hour, full of statesmanlike overtones, proved to be an act of calculated publicity.